

Counting Breaths by pokeasleepingsmaug

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Summary:

On that night when Jonathan saves her, the only thing keeping Nancy from slipping back into that place is inhale, one, exhale, two; and the way that Jonathan's eyelids flutter when he dreams.

Counting Breaths

Inhale, one. Exhale, two. Inhale, one. Exhale, two. In the darkness when everything threatens to engulf her, when she hears again the slurping of the monster sending shivers down her spine, his breathing is an anchor that keeps her from falling into that other place. She's been counting his breaths since the moment they evened out, when his grip on her hand slackened and she was suddenly left feeling alone. Inhale, one. Exhale, two. The counting reminds her that she isn't, that she could shake him awake and he would just hold her like he did in the forest. *I've got you.*

She shouldn't be staring at him, shouldn't notice the way his hair brushes his fluttering eyelids and the way he sighs in his sleep. The sound of his breathing shouldn't be the only thing keeping her sane, the only thing that keeps the floor from cracking open and sucking her back into that darkness. Inhale, one. Exhale, two, and Nancy is smart so she knows what's happening with every breath. She can picture it in her mind's eye.

Inhale, one. Exhale, two. Oxygen into his lungs. An exchange of gases in the alveoli, oxygen into the blood and carbon monoxide filtered from it. A beat of his heart; if she looks closely at the juncture beneath his chin she can see it. She imagines that oxygen-rich blood traveling through his veins, touching everything in him from the roots of his hair to the nailbeds on his toes. It's easy to lose herself in something so concrete, so miraculous. So human. Inhale one. Exhale, two.

She wants to surge in him like that blood, to touch every single molecule of him, to fuse their cells together until his breath is hers because his breaths make sense to her. Inhale, one. Exhale, two. But her own breaths are a chaos, a whirlwind, too fast sometimes and too shallow, nothing is coursing from her hair to her toes and she's cold cold cold so cold because her lungs can't gasp enough oxygen and again she's in that dark place where ash falls like snow but Jonathan is still breathing and she grasps that rhythm like a lifeline. Inhale, one. Exhale, two.

Maybe she should have just not gone into the woods with him, been

content with her teenage rebellion and her eventual metamorphosis into a cul-de-sac housewife but that's not what she wants, it's never been what she wanted. She wants lab coats and respect and making the sick feel better and when she pictures the one she wants beside her, it isn't a smug attitude and perfect hair and a smile that doesn't make her knees feel weak anymore.

It's shaggy hair and tired eyes and patient hands and the click of a shutter lens and it's admitting that things will never be normal again and it's inhale, one. Exhale, two. She wants to fight that like she fights the darkness that threatens to drown her, but how can she fight it when inhale, one, exhale, two; is the only thing that keeps her from ripping her hair out from the roots? She wants to grind her own self into dust, dust that swirls in the air so that he can breathe her in and steady her and why is she so afraid?

Nancy Wheeler is many things but afraid has never been one of them, and three small words should never make a person burst like a raindrop hitting the pavement. *I've got you.* It's a promise and she knows it and she hates that she knows that Steve loves her and she knows that if she wants things to feel normal, Jonathan can't be her lifeline any longer. She'll have to forget him, forget those words and the safety of his chest against her cheek in the woods and the way he rocked her like a child and whispered those tiny words into her hair like a promise that she's going to spend the rest of her life pretending was never uttered.

But that can be for tomorrow, when the sun rises just like it always does and things always seem less real in the light of day. Tomorrow can be for pretending her world isn't a lie, but tonight is for knowing that it is. Tonight is for trying her best not to sink beneath her thoughts, for the way Jonathan looks so carefree and so *fucking* beautiful when he sleeps. Tonight is for imagining she is the blood in his veins and trying to pretend that he isn't suddenly the oxygen in her lungs. Inhale, one. Exhale, two.